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ABRAHAM LINCOLN AS A STRATEGIST.

BY ARCHIBALD FORBES.

II.

WEBSTER'S dictionary defines strategy as "The science of military command." It is not a severe strain on this definition, in dealing with Lincoln as a strategist, and regarding him as Commander-in-Chief of the military forces of the Union, to review his selections for the higher commands in the field. In those he was by no means uniformly happy, and this for several reasons. He was not himself a soldier; he found little guidance in antecedents; in some instances personal predilections swayed him unconsciously; in others political influences had effect; in yet others the voice of the public had to be listened to. Had not Porter injured his career by becoming the friend of McClellan, his skill and tenacity, so finely illustrated at Mechanicsville and Gaines's Mill, on the retreat to the James, and at Malvern Hill, must have raised him to high command. But for the popular prejudice against him, resulting from the opening reverse of Bull Run, for which he was not in the least to blame, and but for the undeserved calumnies of which he was the victim at the disastrous close of Pope's campaign, McDowell might well have been chosen by the President for the ultimate command of the Army of the Potomac. The selection of Burnside was exceptionally unfortunate. Throughout the war he was honest but incapable, and his "manly" assumption of the responsibility for the disaster of Fredericksburg was poor solace to the nation for the ghastly slaughter of its finest soldiery. Hooker's faults, to be noticed later, were almost virtues when compared with Burnside's incom-

petence. The shiningly successful leaders of the Civil War on the Northern side, the men whose names will go down to the ages in connection with it—Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, Thomas—made themselves what they became, rather than were selected in virtue of insight manifested by the President.

Nevertheless, it is strictly true that Lincoln in choosing his commanders, as in every other phase of his career as President, lived for the Union, endured for it, ignored himself for it, humiliated himself for it, and crowned his heroic devotion by dying for it. With him all was as nothing that did not work toward the preservation of the Union. “My paramount object in this struggle,” were his memorable words to Horace Greeley, “is to save the Union, and not either to save or to destroy slavery.” It was with a single eye to that paramount object that he selected his army commanders, irrespectively of their acceptability or the reverse, their devotion or the reverse, to himself.

McClellan was at once his greatest discovery and his greatest mistake. He became enraptured with the skill and genius in organization, which this bright young selection of his displayed. So imbued was he with the belief that in him he had found his heaven-born general that he allowed McClellan to obtain a certain dominance over him. In the previous article were outlined his struggles in the shackles of that dominance, which eventuated in McClellan’s triumphal expedition to the lower Chesapeake. Doubts as to the “young Napoleon’s” ardor for the fray were probably already in the President’s mind when McClellan declined the attempt to oust Johnston from Manassas. His clamor for reinforcements, and for guns for service in the siege of Yorktown could not have dispelled that suspicion, and it must have been intensified by the delay at Williamsburg and the extreme leisure of the subsequent advance to the Chickahominy. He must have realized that Fair Oaks was not McClellan’s battle, but Johnston’s, since the former, three days before it, had expressed his belief that the latter was “too able” to adventure the offensive. The disillusionment must have been about completed when McClellan stated that he “was quietly closing in upon the enemy preparatory to the last struggle,” and when nothing came of those leisurely preparations. How fully at length the President had found out his man stands revealed, when he was in the midst of his exertions to thwart Jackson’s raid down the Valley of the Potomac, in his

curt injunction to McClellan to "attack Richmond or give up the job."

After McClellan's disastrous retreat to the James, after his exhibition of insubordination in his despatch from Savage Station, and above all on the clear evidence from the the past, that, let him be reinforced ever so strongly, he had not the resolution to make a strenuous effort to fight his way into Richmond, and was simply pigeonholed passively in a nook of the peninsula, the time had surely come for the long-suffering President in the interest of the cause to deprive him of his command. It would seem from the point of view of the present argument that for Lincoln to have refrained from this was bad strategy.

Messrs. Nicolay and Hay accredit the President with having treated McClellan with great magnanimity in appointing him to the command of the defence of Washington and to effect the reorganization of Pope's troops on the disastrous termination of that officer's campaign. They write with great frankness: "Mr. Lincoln certainly had the defects of his great qualities. His unbounded magnanimity made him sometimes incapable even of just resentments."

From familiar personal knowledge these admirable biographers had naturally much insight into the character of their great chief; and in this they have the advantage of all other commentators. Yet if my estimate of Lincoln is correct, that his sole concern was centred in the safeguarding of the Union, it would follow that there was room in his mind neither for resentments nor for magnanimity, but that with given concentration on the great end, he impartially used the tools which seemed to him best befitted to his purpose. And in this juncture McClellan was obviously the tool to use.

How resolute in a purpose on which he had once set himself was the President, is illustrated in his making this appointment in the face of the opposition of a majority of his Cabinet, four of whom went so far as to sign a written remonstrance "against McClellan's continuing in command of any army in the Union." Stanton disclaimed any responsibility for the appointment, and Chase, while full of scorn for what he considered the President's lack of spirit, nevertheless accorded him the meed of honest regard for the public weal when he wrote in his diary: "It (the appointment) is . . . prompted, I believe, by a sincere

desire to serve the country, and by a fear that should he supersede McClellan by any other commander, no advantage would be gained in leadership, but much harm in the disaffection of officers and troops."

Lincoln counted nothing humiliating to him that promised to assist the great cause for which he lived. How regardless of his own dignity was he when the sacrifice of it gave a prospect of advantage to the State is evinced by his stooping to request McClellan to exert his personal influence with his sworn allies in the high commands of the Army of the Potomac to purge themselves of the spirit of "hostility and insubordination" so openly displayed by many of the most prominent among them.

The man of whom such a service was asked could scarcely have described himself truly as going to Antietam with "a halter about his neck." Nevertheless, though he still held to him the Army of the Potomac, he had lost with the nation the mesmerism of his prestige. But fortune favored him. Pope's regiments turned out so much less demoralized than had been supposed, that McClellan's work of organization was easier and shorter than could have been anticipated. He was as assiduous in that work as ever; as ever he was slow when the march with an enemy at the end of it came to be undertaken. Rarely indeed has it been the good fortune of a general at the beginning of a campaign to find himself placed in full knowledge of his adversaries' disposition; yet the possession of that enormous advantage could not stir McClellan into prompt alacrity. His sluggishness cost the loss of the garrison of Harper's Ferry. He threw away invaluable time before taking the offensive at South Mountain; and he could have done Lee no better service than in wasting a whole long autumn day in deliberately putting his army into position for the unscientific, unpurposeful and butcherly fighting of the morrow.

Antietam was fought on the 17th of September, 1862. Not until the 26th of October did McClellan begin to cross the Potomac. During the interval of more than five weeks he had practically been immobile, while Lee quietly watched him from Winchester. During that interval he had continuously clamored for reinforcements, for reëquipment of all kinds, for supplies on supplies. He had disregarded Halleck's taunt of October 7 that in his army there was a "decided want of legs," and ignored

the President's peremptory order to move. Then on the 13th Lincoln sent him a letter so full of strategic wisdom, so informed with the alternative strategic possibilities, so charged with lucid comprehension of the opportunities, that of itself it would indicate the great President's title to be a strategist of the first order. It is too long to be quoted *in extenso*, and the extracts of which space admits do not adequately illustrate its merits as a whole.

"One of the standard maxims of war," he wrote, "is to 'operate upon the enemy's communications as much as possible without exposing your own.' You seem to act as if this applies against you, but cannot apply in your favor. Change positions with the enemy, and think you not he would break your communications with Richmond within the next twenty-four hours? You dread his going into Pennsylvania, but if he does so in full force, he gives up his communications to you absolutely, and you have nothing to do but follow and ruin him. If he does so with less than full force, fall upon and beat what is left behind all the easier. You are now nearer Richmond than is the enemy by the route he and you must take. Why can you not reach there before him, unless you admit that he is more than your equal in a march? His route is the arc of a circle, while yours is the chord. The roads are as good on yours as on his. I desired you to cross the Potomac below instead of above the Shenandoah and the Blue Ridge, my idea being that this step would at once menace the enemy's communications, which I would seize if he would permit. Should he move northward, I would follow him closely, holding his communications. If he should prevent our seizing his communications and move towards Richmond, I would press closely to him, fight him if a favorable opportunity should present, and at the least try to beat him to Richmond on the inside track. If he makes a stand at Winchester, moving neither north nor south, I would fight him there, on the ground that if we cannot beat him when (as now) he bears the wastage of coming to us, we never can when we bear the wastage of going to him. As we must beat him somewhere or fail finally, we can do it, if at all, easier when he is near to us than when he is on his own ground at a distance from us. . . . In moving towards Richmond on the inside track, the facility of supplying you on the flank furthest from the enemy is remarkable. Marching by the chord line, turnpikes, railroads, and finally the Potomac by Aquia Creek, meet you at all points from Washington; the same, only the line a little lengthened, if you press closer to the Blue Ridge part of the way. The latter route, as nearest the enemy, I consider preferable; as disabling him from making an important move without your knowledge, and compelling him to keep his forces together for dread of you. The gaps (in the Blue Ridge) would enable you to attack him if you should wish. For a great part of the way you would practically be between the enemy and both Washington and Richmond, enabling us to spare you the greatest number of troops from here. When at length your running for Richmond ahead of him enables him to move this way, if he does so, then turn round and attack him in his rear. But I think he should be engaged long before such point is reached. It seems all easy if our troops march as well as the enemy, and it is unmanly to say they cannot do this."

Here every alternative is recognized and the method of deal-

ing with it prescribed. One of the alternatives, and this the one which characteristically McClellan most apprehended, the President obviously regarded as most remote—the contingency that Lee might invade Pennsylvania. Had he thought this likely or even reasonably possible, he would not have concerned himself in so great detail with urging the advantage of the march to Richmond on “the inside track.” He clearly recognized that among the virtues of that course, was making impossible a Confederate advance into Pennsylvania, unless Lee had become a lunatic. Had this not been his conviction, it may be safely assumed that he would have detained McClellan in the Cumberland Valley until Lee either should cross the Potomac, or withdraw southward, if, as would have been but too probable, the former could not have been prevailed on to strike the Confederate chief in his position at Winchester.

Admirable as was the letter from which the above quotations have been taken, there is, however, a point in the armor of its argument which in candor must be exposed. Lincoln’s reasoning was on the assumption that a Northern army could march as fast as a Southern one. Twice in his letter he postulates this equality, once indeed denouncing an assertion to the contrary as “unmanly.” Unmanly or not, the operation to the contrary was a “hard fact.” The individual Northerner might cover ground as far and as fast as the Southerner, but throughout the war, with a solitary exception—the rush without impediments from Petersburg to Appomattox—no Northern army ever had the heels of the unencumbered cohorts of the South. A week later than the date of the President’s letter to McClellan, Halleck under his directions wrote thus to Buell, who, after the battle of Perryville had expelled Bragg from Kentucky with what he considered reasonable expedition: “The President does not understand why we cannot march as the enemy marches, live as he lives, and fight as he fights, unless we admit the inferiority of our troops and of our generals.” Buell’s answer was conclusive and went direct to the heart of the matter. “The spirit of the rebellion,” he replied, “enforces a subordination and patient submission to privations and want, which public sentiment renders absolutely impossible among our troops. Again, instead of imitating the enemy’s methods, I should rather say that his failure had been in a measure due to their peculiar character.”

The late Quartermaster-General of the war time, in his farewell to the Department whose honored head he had so long been, could make the modest and truthful claim that only during two short intervals did any troops of the Union lack their full and regular rations. But this fulness and regularity could be attained only by the troops being followed close by ample trains; and it may be taken as an axiom that in a poorly-roaded country ample trains and long, swift marches, such as those of Jackson from the Rappahannock to Manassas, through Thoroughfare Gap, and up the Shenandoah Valley, fighting as he hurried, are incompatible. After Buell's blunt retort, Lincoln is no more found upholding the North's equality of marching power.

McClellan accepted in principle the President's project of an advance towards Richmond on the "inside track," delaying, however, to move until ten days later. By November 7 he had slowly drifted as far south as Rectortown. Before then Lee had struck into the "inside track," at Culpeper, thus interposing between McClellan and Richmond. The President had determined to draw the line at this contingency. When it occurred he deprived McClellan of his command, and the military career of that officer terminated.

The President gave Burnside no instructions of a strategic character, unless that complexion may belong to the permission that he might undertake the "mud march" on his own responsibility. Nothing can be finer than the tone of his letter to Hooker on his promotion as Burnside's successor. When the new chief of the Army of the Potomac had pulled his command together, and was ready for action with 130,000 men at his back, he wrote to the President a sketch of that projected movement of his which ended disastrously at Chancellorsville, characteristically expressing his apprehension lest Lee should retire from before him the moment he should cross the river, by the shortest line to Richmond, and "thus escape being seriously crippled." The President, in replying, did not in so many words discourage the scheme devised by the man whom he had esteemed good soldier enough to be put in command of a great army. That was a responsibility on which the civilian strategist would not venture; but it would have been well for Hooker if he had allowed himself to be influenced by the tenor of the memorandum which the President promptly sent him.

"My opinion is," wrote Lincoln, "that just now, with the enemy directly ahead of us, there is no eligible route for us into Richmond. Hence our prime object is the enemy's army in front of us, and is not with or about Richmond at all, unless incidentally to the main object. What then? The two armies are face to face with a narrow river between them. Our communications are shorter and safer" (by Aquia Creek) "than are those of the enemy. For this reason we can, with equal powers, fret him more than he can us. I do not think that by raids towards Washington he can derange the Army of the Potomac at all. He has no distant operations which can call any of the Army of the Potomac away; we have such operations which may call him away, at least in part" (in South Carolina, at Vicksburg, etc.). "While he remains intact I do not think we should take the disadvantage of attacking him in his intrenchments, but we should continually harass and menace him, so that he shall have no leisure or safety in sending away detachments. If he weakens himself, then pitch into him."

The President could not but discern that the attempt by a wide turning movement, in wooded and intricate ground, which had been very imperfectly, if indeed at all, reconnoitred, to take in rear the Confederate army now occupying Fredericksburg heights, was an extremely hazardous undertaking. If to dislodge it from that commanding position was at present an object of great importance, the President indicated how the attainment of that object might be set about—by fretment, by raids on its communications, by menacing its flanks, etc. Stoneman's raid, more thoroughly and energetically carried out when the weather should improve, by destroying Lee's communications, would have compelled him to evacuate the position and fall back on his depôts. But Hooker's impatience so overmastered him that, whereas Stoneman was to have been sent out a fortnight in advance of the main movement, and was retarded by swollen rivers and impassable roads, Hooker's infantry and Stoneman's cavalry crossed the Rappahannock together, and Stoneman had scarcely begun his work when already defeat had befallen Hooker. Once again the incapacity of its chief had thrown the dark shadow of defeat on the army of the Potomac, and the President had once again the dreary task of writing heartening letters to a discomfited commander. By this he must have got accustomed to that melancholy duty.

It was so far to Hooker's credit that he discerned Lee's intention to march across Virginia to the Upper Potomac in advance of the commencement of that movement which began on June 3. It was a strangely executed movement, conducted as if in sheer contempt of the Federal army; straggled athwart Virginia, its

head was actually at Winchester, within a few marches of the Potomac, while its rear still stood fast in the Fredericksburg lines. The Nicolay-Hay biography expresses great commendation of Hooker's conduct at this juncture : " He was moving his force from the line of Aquia to the Potomac with wonderful efficiency and skill ;"—" his action was never more intelligent and energetic than at this time."

With all respect for the authors of that admirable work, I must venture to demur to these encomiums. What was the plain duty before Hooker, as soldier alike and citizen ? The irresistible inference from his prognosis just cited was that Lee's intention was to invade Maryland or Pennsylvania. It was a reproach to the North as a military power that its territory should be isolated by hostile arms. Not only this, but invasion involved the desolation of Northern homes, the burning of Northern villages, requisitions at the bayonet's point, the misery and dismay of Northern communities. Surely it lay upon Hooker to strain every nerve to avert this reproach, and to fend off from his countrymen the horrors of invasion. It behooved him, then, immediately to envelop the left flank of Lee's army with his greatly superior force of cavalry, charged as soon as Lee's, the head of Lee's advance moved out, to send the Federal commander prompt information that the Confederate movement had begun. Pending such intelligence Hooker had ample time to bring his forces together, and have them in readiness to move at short notice. On receipt of the expected information he was promptly to move out, the head of his army somewhat ahead of his adversary, the mass following in echelon ; not trailed out, yet not too closely compacted. He had the interior lines—the " inside track ; " all the way to the Blue Ridge his march would cover Washington. Opportunities might offer to strike the " slim animal " to advantage in the course of the march, and by utilizing his shorter distance it would be possible for him to be in position in advance on the northern bank of the Potomac, standing there resolute to thwart the enemy's attempt to invade the Northern soil. In all this there is no strain on possibilities, but the contrary. Marching on the chord would have compensated for the slower Northern pace ; from Washington by numerous roads would have radiated to him supplies and reinforcements ; success would have given him the fee simple of the command of the Army of the Potomac.

And what did he actually do to merit the encomiums to which I have taken exception? When Ewell was already in the Shenandoah Valley Sickles, heading Hooker's advance, was no further than at Bealeton, two marches out from headquarters on the Falmouth plateau. Hooker, serenely remaining there, was meditating the dubious exploit of striking at Hill, still remaining on the Fredericksburg intrenchments, a project of which the President disapproved in terms as quaint as they were strategically sound. The enemy, he wrote, would be fighting behind intrenchments, "and have you at disadvantage, and so, man for man, worst you at that point, while his main force would in some way be getting an advantage of you northward. In one word, I would not take any risk of being entangled upon the river like an ox jumped half over a fence and liable to be torn by dogs front and rear without a fair chance to gore one way or kick the other." Then, Lee in full march on the Upper Potomac, Hooker made the wild proposal that he should be allowed to march on Richmond, a project which might have resulted in the fulfilment of Lee's grim jest about "swapping queens." This erratic scheme found no favor with Lincoln, whose answer was: "I would not go south of Rappahannock upon Lee's moving north of it. If you had Richmond invested to-day you would not be able to take it in twenty days. I think Lee's army, and not Richmond, is your sure objective point"—the great fact which the President had already comprehended in the early days, and never after left grip of. Finally Hooker struck camp on June 13, Hill being so polite as to see him off before he, too, moved. He hurt Lee nowhere south of the Potomac. It is quite true, if it were anything to be proud of, that in the words of the biographers, Hooker "was able at perfect leisure to choose his time and place for crossing the river." Indeed, with somewhat misplaced complaisance, he "waited" until Lee's whole army was on the north side; and, while at length he was leisurely crossing, Ewell and Hill and Longstreet were also choosing at perfect leisure their times and places for harrying unfortunate Pennsylvania almost to the Susquehanna. Yet Hooker on the Potomac was preferable to Hooker fiddling outside Richmond while Rome was burning beyond the Virginia line, and it has to be said that but for the President he might have been in the former locality.

Lincoln does not appear to have written any strategic letters to Grant, Sherman, or Sheridan. There is an interesting series of letters of that character to Burnside in East Tennessee during Rosecrans's evil days in Chattanooga, but the subject is of subordinate importance. Some of the President's letters to Rosecrans would strengthen the contention that he possessed strategic genius were there space to quote and elucidate them.

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